

## Lessons Learned in Public Image Management 1

### Lessons Learned in Public Image Management:

An examination of public relations strategies employed by public agencies during  
Hurricane Katrina

Cassandra Keyse

California Polytechnic State University

Senior Project

Doug Swanson, Ed.D

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**Abstract**

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August of 2005, many were left without shelter and in need of immediate federal assistance. This presented many public organizations with a crisis that they weren't properly prepared to respond to, both in the literal sense and in their public image management preparation. The United States Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Response Agency were two of these agencies that received criticism from the public and in the press about their lack of a timely response to the disaster. A content analysis of a local newspaper from New Orleans and a national newspaper shows that the amount of negative coverage of these two agencies increased after the disaster. This evidence supports the claim that the agencies' public images were negatively impacted from the disaster. Recommendations are provided for how organizations should properly prepare for crises situations before and after a possible incident in order to best survive the situation.

## **Introduction**

It is in every organization's interest to maintain a positive public image. Whether it is a private corporation or a public governmental agency, both sectors can only benefit from proper management of their publics' perceptions of the organization. For private companies, the benefits to be reaped from a positive public image are those of increased confidence in the organization on behalf of the organization's publics and key stakeholders. For governmental agencies, a positive image helps not only to increase confidence, but also to legitimize the agency's existence and reinforce trust in their work.

Public agencies, however, do not enjoy as much freedom when it comes to public relations work as private organizations do. There are laws in place that have restricted how these agencies spend money on publicity and these laws have prevented the utilization of proactive communication strategies that would help these agencies improve their images with their publics before a crisis situation occurs.

Natural disasters are among the worst of crisis situations and almost always require reactive communication strategies for the organizations involved, particularly the public governmental agencies that have the responsibilities of protecting the people and maintaining standards of safety in these situations. One of the most recent natural disasters in the United States occurred on August 29, 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Two public agencies were called upon to react to this disaster and consequently, their public images suffered as a result: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Due to the actions of these agencies in the wake of Katrina, both local and national press organizations were quick to report on the public criticism at the agencies'

expense.

The dramatic drop in public image that these two organizations experienced could have been avoided had these agencies been utilizing proactive communication strategies prior to the disaster. With proper public relations budget management, public agencies' images will be able to better survive crisis situations based on the reputation they have already established with their key publics. This research will show how the public images of USACE and FEMA were changed by the press coverage they received in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and will also examine how these types of organizations can better utilize strategic communications funding in order to establish and maintain a positive public image.

In order to identify the best proactive solutions that public governmental agencies should be using, it is important to take note of strategies that are already in use. By looking at Hurricane Katrina, FEMA and USACE as a case study of crisis communication, this research will be able to identify the advantages and disadvantages of different crisis communication strategies and propose those strategies that have proven successful in the past as a solution to maintaining a positive public image for public agencies in the future. The relevant background literature for analyzing the public images of USACE and FEMA were changed by the press coverage they received after Hurricane Katrina and to examine how public governmental organizations can benefit from proper image management techniques, it is important to include general definitions of related terms as well as information from the news media on the specific natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina, and the organizations whose public images suffered from this situation.

### **Literature Review**

In examining this case study, George Gerbner's "Cultivation Analysis Theory" of Mass

Media and Communication, which seeks to explain how “mass media exposure cultivates certain attitudes in people,” will be used to determine how exposure to articles with either positive or negative outlooks on the agencies in the case study affect perception of them. Although this theory's main focus is on how television viewers “are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most stable and recurrent patterns of portrayals in the television world,” this theory can also be applied to regular newspaper readers (Harmon, 2001). In the same way that regular exposure to newscasts can affect a person's attitudes, regularly reading articles in a newspaper that consistently portray an organization in a particular light can affect the reader's perception of that organization.

A separate theory will also be used to explain why people become susceptible to messages relayed through mass media. The “Uses and Gratification Theory” proposes that people “are motivated by psychological, social, and sociocultural influences to use mass media to accomplish particular ends, conceived as 'gratifications’” (Swanson, 1987). The messages conveyed through mass media can be interpreted differently from person to person depending on the type of gratification the person is seeking from the message. A wide variety of media consumers were exposed to the newspaper articles regarding Hurricane Katrina, USACE and FEMA, and although there is no way of accurately measuring the percentage of the audience who sought out a negative message from these articles for their own gratification, one can assume that the negative tone of the articles had at least somewhat of an affect on the readers' attitudes towards the entities involved.

Lastly, a third theory will be used to explain how public agencies approach crisis situations involving several possible solution strategies. The process of “conflict resolution

explores multiple and competing goals and examines expressed and underlying interests and needs of the parties” (Power, 1998, p.120). Considering this definition, organizations must weigh public relations options against one another, regardless of conflicting goals and possible outcomes of these options, in order to make the best decision for the situation at hand.

It is important to differentiate between public relations work and public affairs work as the terms are often used interchangeably when in reality they have separate definitions. According to the text “Public Relations” by Edward Bernays, the definition of public relations is divided into three different parts: “(1) information given to the public, (2) persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes and actions, and (3) efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its publics and of publics with that institution” (Bernays, 1952). Whereas public relations work can apply to many different organizations, public affairs is often the term used for public governmental organizations and refers to those experts responsible for relating governmental proceedings to the greater public (Armstrong, 1981). Armstrong does acknowledge that there are some aspects of public relations and public affairs that overlap that include corporations’ community relations and communication related to shared issues.

The major difference between public relations and public affairs is in the way that funding is allocated for image management. With private firms and generally with public relations departments within private organizations, operations are within a set budget and the goal of that budget is to communicate positive aspects of the organization to the public. However, budgetary issues are complicated in the public affairs departments of public and governmental agencies. The Gillette Amendment of 1913 forbade any public entity from spending government funds on publicity without Congressional approval. It was then reviewed

and rewritten in 1972 to include the prohibition of “government spending on publicity or propaganda purposes designed to support or defeat legislation pending before the Congress” (DeSanto, 2000).

In addition to the Gillette Amendment, in 1922 a separate incident involving U.S. Senator Thomas Heflin and the Federal Reserve Bank further tightened Congressional regulations on public affairs activities. Upset with the way in which the bank was using its own funds to promote positive aspects of itself to the public, Heflin brought the attention of Congress to the bank, claiming that the bank was using federal funds to spread propaganda. The issue ended with a congressional decision to limit the public affairs activities of governmental agencies to “statements through the press and limited to non-controversial issues” (Lee, 2009). It is because of these legislative regulations that public affairs departments of governmental and public agencies have practiced “self-limitation” in terms of image management. Organizations often misquote the legislation, which leads to the inhibition of public affairs personnel to carry out their jobs (Brown, 1981). By taking control of their budget and utilizing it in ways to promote a positive image, public and governmental organizations can better earn the confidence of the greater public.

It is important to discuss the different kinds of communications strategies available to organizations that can affect their public image. Primarily, there are two different categories of strategies available for organizations: proactive strategies and reactive strategies. According to Ronald Smith's “Strategic Planning for Public Relations,” the most effective strategies available are proactive ones, meaning that organization has the opportunity to implement communication strategies according to their own agenda. This allows for creativity and freedom to utilize action

strategies which are “tangible deeds undertaken by the organization in an effort to achieve its objectives” (Smith, 2002). Reactionary strategies, such as those that are needed to respond to a crisis situation such as a natural disaster, limit the types of communication that an organization can implement in order to solve a particular problem.

One reactionary strategy that is commonly employed during a natural disaster is crisis management, which is “the preparation and application of strategies and tactics that can prevent or modify the impact of major events on the company or organization” (Caywood, 1997). In his book “The Handbook for Strategic Public Relations & Integrated Communications,” Caywood outlines the steps that an organization should take in the event that a crisis occurs. The aspect of his crisis outline that separates his strategy from others is that his includes an element of proactive action in the form of a crisis plan prepared for use in the event of a crisis situation. A plan such as this would have an assessment of the possible risks that the organization might incur in any crisis and would contain materials such as press releases, positive information on the organization, and explanations of why the crisis occurred. A plan such as this is something that USACE and FEMA would've had to have in place to be prepared for any such natural disaster.

Reputation management and crisis management have an intertwined relationship where one cannot occur without the proper implementation of the other. A study by Lisa Lyon Payne in the “Journal of Promotion Management” discussed the pros and cons of responding to a crisis by “stonewalling or obfuscating information” instead of admitting fault in a situation and taking public responsibility for the consequences (Payne, 2006). The study found that more positive ratings were given to organizations that publicly apologized and took responsibility for an unfavorable situation than those that used a “no comment” type of response to the media.



Diana Martinelli conducted a different, but related study on the effectiveness of external and internal communicative efforts of a public governmental agency in her study of nationwide State Departments of Transportation. She found that a low percentage of departments had established a formal communication plan and had communication budgets already in place. The study also found that the departments self-reported having adequate internal communication but lacked communication to their outside publics. “By ignoring external audiences, e.g. legislators, other agencies, the public, key support for its agency's work and budgets might be lost” (Martinelli, 2006). The article offered advice to public agencies to properly manage communicative activities so that both internal and external publics are included.

It is important to also examine how the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina as well as the governmental organizations USACE and FEMA were analyzed in journal articles and the news media. The information gained from looking at these articles provides historical backgrounds on the organizations involved, the use of crisis communication during the hurricane, and also includes newspaper articles that openly criticize these organizations for various communication tactics used since the natural disaster that have damaged their public images.

Hurricane Katrina and the crisis communication that was associated with that particular natural disaster is discussed in the article “Risk Communication Failure: A Case Study of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina,” by Cole and Fellows. Risk communication is a term supplemented by crisis communication and is defined as “the interactive process of exchange of information and opinions among individuals, groups and, institutions concerning the problem of a risk or potential risk and how that problem should be solved.” In contrast, crisis

communication in this article is used to minimize risk from a particular risk situation. The article discussed the reasons why risk communication during Hurricane Katrina ultimately failed, and also addressed the involvement of two organizations that my research focuses on (ASCE and FEMA).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency was created in response to a series of natural disasters that occurred between the 1960s-1970s. President Jimmy Carter created the organization to be a centralized agency that would be in charge of responding to crises situations. In 2001, FEMA identified the three most likely disasters to hit the country in the near future: a devastating earthquake in California, a hurricane hitting New Orleans and a terrorist attack on New York City. As history played out, one of the predictions came true later that same year (September 11 terrorist attacks) and then the second in 2005 (Hurricane Katrina). The agency received criticism for its lack of preparation during Hurricane Katrina and receive much negative press regarding how emergency aid was distributed (“The Storm: A Short History of FEMA,” 2005).

FEMA has received a significant amount of press coverage since Hurricane Katrina that initially began as praise for their reaction to the disaster and then quickly turned to criticism as the aftermath played out. Public opinion of FEMA before the hurricane was that it had focused too much of its attention on terrorism, instead of taking an “all-disaster” approach to appropriating resources. What the “New York Times” article points out was that FEMA did have intentions of formulating a response plan in case of a natural disaster like Katrina, but this plan was not finished by the time the hurricane hit. Due to a lack of centralized control, news conferences held by Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray

Nagin, and Head of FEMA Michael D. Brown competed for coverage (Lipton, 2005). As centralized leadership is a key to effective communication, FEMA's lack of leadership was criticized during the natural disaster as well (Times Wire Report, 2005).

Various media relations tactics from FEMA were also covered negatively by the press even years after Katrina. For the residents displaced by Katrina flooding and living in FEMA housing tracks, the organization had a media policy in place that would not allow these people to speak with the press without an official FEMA representative present. The media was quick to point out that the residents' First Amendment rights were being infringed upon and FEMA was forced to lift the policy after they were publicly criticized ("SPJ Pressure Prompts FEMA to Revamp Media Policy," 2006). In another situation, FEMA staged a "fake" news conference in which they alerted media representatives of the conference only 10 minutes before it was to be held. A representative then continued with the event, fielding questions from FEMA employees instead of press representatives (Nolan, 2007).

Although the organization did earn positive press coverage for their response to flooding in Iowa in 2008, their public image was still rated low three years after Hurricane Katrina (Paulsen, 2008). A *Washington Post* article called "FEMA's image still tarnished by Katrina" listed the agency as last in a survey of favorable government agencies for the second consecutive year. Taking into consideration the results of the same survey from years past, FEMA's ratings fell dramatically after Hurricane Katrina and have continued to fall. The article said that while the cause for the drop could not be undoubtedly determined, the amount of negative publicity that the organization received in the Katrina aftermath is most likely the cause. The article also said that the agencies that ranked at the top of the list (i.e., U.S. Postal Service, National Parks

Service, and U.S. Forest Service) all maintained constant interaction with the public. In general, large companies that consumers are familiar with (i.e., Home Depot, Hershey, Kodak) tend to receive higher ratings than public agencies (Barr, 2008).

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was started in 1775 when the first army engineer was designated under the command of General George Washington. Since its beginnings, the government organization has been charged with the responsibility “for a nationwide program to protect against flooding,” as well as other responsibilities involving, among other things, the maintenance and management of levees and dams (“United States Army Corps of Engineers,” 1999). These responsibilities are those that tie USACE with Hurricane Katrina, as they were responsible for the management of the levees on the Gulf Coast that were breeched during the storm.

Although USACE did not receive as much negative press involving Hurricane Katrina as FEMA did, their image still suffered as a result of the disaster. It continues to suffer the ramifications of the flooding caused by Katrina for not maintaining the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) as homeowners, business owners and the like sued them for damaged incurred from the flooding. An article from *The Boston Globe* explained the outrage of those that lost their property due to the flooding. The corps is still defending itself, backed by the federal government, arguing that the “massive storm surge, not the MRGO, caused the catastrophic flooding.” Unfortunately, the large amount of people involved in the suit gained much negative attention to the organization (Burdeau, 2009).

On November 2009, a U.S. judge ruled that USACE is responsible for the damages that the hurricane caused. *USA Today* reported that negligence on the part of the corps to maintain the

MRGO canal was the direct cause of the flooding. This ruling marks the first time that a federal agency has been deemed responsible for damages from Hurricane Katrina, and serves as proof that the organization's public image is still suffering from this disaster. Although the government is going to appeal the decision which requires that they pay \$720,000 in damages to the complaining six residents and a business, there is a greater concern of the possible precedent that this ruling sets for suing the federal government over damages incurred from future natural disasters (Jervis, 2009).

The organization was also criticized for not releasing seemingly public documents to the press in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Because matters of national security were taken especially seriously after this event, USACE deemed the release of flood maps to journalists to post online to warn residents of potential threats to their safety a matter of national security. In an article titled “The Flow of Information: A post Sept. 11 crackdown on data about dams and dikes has frustrated journalists trying to warn of potential disasters,” journalists from *The Tennessean* (Nashville) and *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY) as well as other publications discuss their encounters with USACE after requesting information on dam safety. The corps, bound by the federal government's stricter rules, told journalists they were going to have to file for a Freedom of Information Act request in order to receive such documents, but then still did not release the documents on the basis of national security. The article made comparisons between the potential flooding from these dams and dikes to the aftermath of Katrina (Grossman, 2007). This sort of interaction with the media is exactly what Payne's study of how organizations should react to the press warned against. The “no comment” answer is the way to turn an organization's key public away from the positive aspects of the organization as a

whole.

The information garnered from background research on these topics helps to relate how the public images of public governmental agencies can be improved using different communication strategies and also yields information on the specific study of Hurricane Katrina and the communication tactics that USACE and FEMA have used in the past. There is significantly more information regarding FEMA's communicative efforts when compared to USACE, however the information that was found about USACE was helpful in understanding the reasons that the press gave them such negative coverage. The information gathered provides a benchmark for further information needed through primary research on the press coverage of these two organizations and their public image management tactics.

### **Methodology**

The methodology used for the literature review was to search for relevant journal articles, newspaper articles and texts on the subjects of crisis communication strategies, public relations strategies of the government agencies (FEMA, USACE) involved in Hurricane Katrina and past research already conducted on the ways to improve governmental agencies' communicative efforts. In order to gauge the public opinion of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a content analysis of a local newspaper and a national paper was conducted to find any articles that mentioned either of the two organizations.

According to Klaus Krippendorff's text "Content Analysis: an introduction to its methodology," content analysis is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff,

2004, p. 18). Similar studies have used this methodology to examine media articles containing certain key terms. Amy E. Potter used a content analysis of newspapers in the United States in order to gain an understanding of how the country of Haiti is represented to the American people. Through her analysis of five different newspapers' articles from 2004 about Haiti, she was able to make generalizations about how the rest of the country's newspapers viewed this country as well (Potter, 2009). Klein et al. also used this methodology in order to demonstrate how media in the United States has reported on Iraq War dissent. Eleven newspapers were searched, resulting in 89 total stories from which the authors were able to conclude that the majority of the coverage was of ordinary citizen's opinions against the war (Klien, A., Byerly, C., McEachern, T., 2009).

Locally, the newspaper that was searched was the *Times-Picayune* out of New Orleans, Louisiana and the national newspaper was *USA Today*. The search was conducted using the archives of the two newspapers' Web sites, and was limited to articles published from March 2005 through March 2006, approximately six months before and six months after Hurricane Katrina. This time period will allow for comparison of coverage from when the organizations were out of the public eye to the period after the hurricane when they received a plethora of attention.

It is important to organize the data that was gathered into different categories in order to better understand the coverage that these organizations received and how the specific content may have had an affect on the public opinions. The categories used to organize data are by overall number of articles found, dates in which the articles were published, by section in which the articles were published in and also by the article's overall connotation (positive or negative

overall tone).

### **Research Questions**

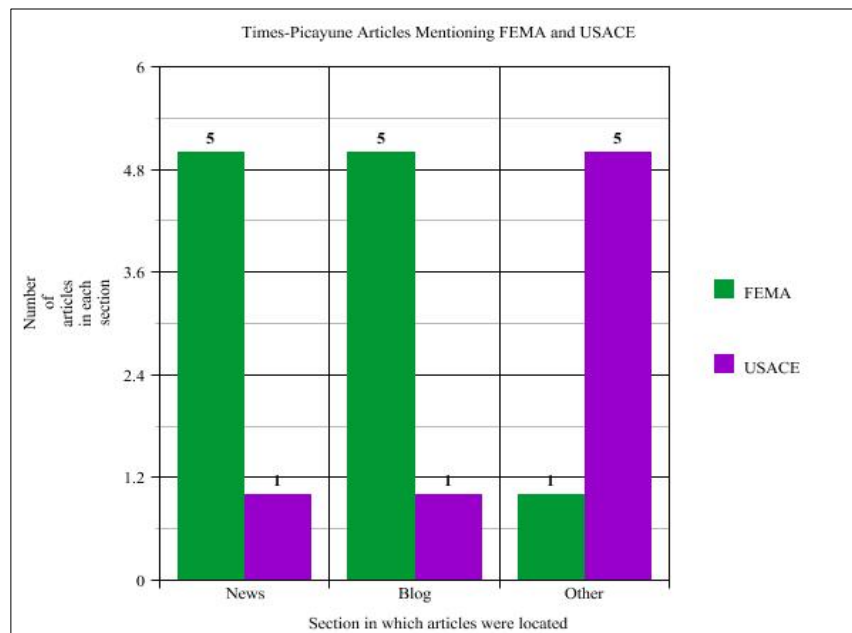
This research aims to answer four specific questions that will broaden the knowledge of public relations as it pertains to public agencies during crisis situations.

- (1) What examples of crisis communication were used during Hurricane Katrina by USACE and FEMA? This question looks to identify which strategies, if any, were utilized during this particular crisis situation.
- (2) How were these agencies represented in the national media as a result of their crisis communication efforts during Hurricane Katrina? To answer this question, a content analysis of two newspapers' archived articles that mention USACE or FEMA by name was conducted. This allows for comparison by content, publication date and number of articles.
- (3) How could these efforts have been improved upon? Answering this research question will involve presenting various articles that propose the best way that organizations can manage their image during a crisis situation.
- (4) What types of crisis communication are available to public agencies, specifically proactive solutions versus reactive solutions? This information will be necessary in order to narrow suggestions for improved communication efforts to those that are actually applicable to public agencies such as USACE and FEMA given that they operate under strict publicity funding restrictions.



## Results

Beginning with the local context, in general the number of articles written about each organization did not significantly differ. The *Times-Picayune* published 11 articles mentioning FEMA and seven mentioning the USACE in the one-year search period. Something that did stick out about these 18 articles was that none of them was published pre-Katrina; each had been published after the hurricane meaning that they were either not pursuing the local media for positive coverage or that the local media simply chose not to write positive stories about the organization. Readers of the *Times-Picayune* were not exposed to any information regarding the organizations before they were thrust into the spotlight, and thus did not have any pre-existing

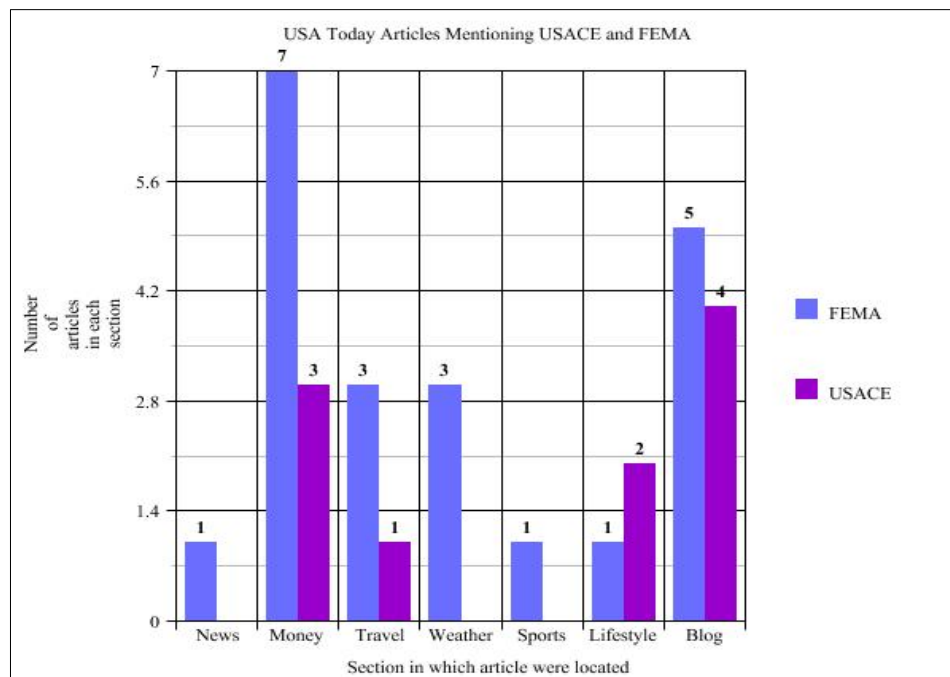


knowledge to compare these articles to.

The overall connotation of the FEMA articles was negative, with all but one containing negative criticism of the organization. Of the articles written with a mention of USACE, only one of them was an actual news article syndicated from the *New York Times*, one was a blog, and

the other five were forum responses from *Times-Picayune* readers. As with the articles about FEMA, all but one mentioning USACE were negative.

*USA Today* is a national daily publication with a self-reported circulation of more than 2 million readers. In comparison, the *Times-Picayune*'s Web site, [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com), reaches only 1 million users each month. There was a sizable difference in the amount of national coverage that FEMA and USACE received in the selected time period surrounding Hurricane Katrina. Whereas the local coverage was relatively similar, the national coverage of FEMA consisted of 21 articles from many different sections of the newspaper, and USACE was only mentioned in 11 articles.



There is a correlation in that both publications had more coverage of FEMA in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. This may be due to the fact that people were more concerned with the health and welfare of the victims affected by the event in the immediate aftermath, and that

concern over the logistics of the disaster were put off until the victims' basic needs were taken care of. This is evident in the fact that the majority of the USACE articles were written in the beginning of 2006 whereas the FEMA articles started on the day that the hurricane hit.

## **Discussion**

### ***Times-Picayune Coverage:***

The coverage of FEMA included one particularly negative news article titled "Biggest FEMA chunk bypassing state," which criticized FEMA's dispersal of federal aid for alternative housing projects. Of the total \$338 million to be distributed, Louisiana was expected to receive \$74.5 million for one project whereas nearby Mississippi would receive \$280 million for two projects. In response to the unequal distribution of funds, Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu said:

"FEMA has clearly learned very little from its mistakes, let alone basic math or a sense of fundamental fairness. Under FEMA's upside-down decision-making, Louisiana gets the short end of the stick for alternative housing programs by almost 4 to 1, despite suffering more than three times the housing loss" (Ritea, 2006).

This statement summarizes the tone of the rest of the article. By insinuating that FEMA is incapable of basic mathematical skills or logical decision-making, Landrieu has inadvertently conveyed the message that FEMA is incompetent to the *Times-Picayune* readers. Since she is in a position of authority as a senator, her opinion carries significantly more weight and is likely to have a greater impact on the opinion of those who read her statement.

The blog postings about FEMA ranged from criticism regarding the amount of waiting and frustration that the hurricane victims had to endure to the lone positive blog that showed sympathy for the organization. It can be argued that the writer of this particular positive piece

was semi-biased as a Peace Corps volunteer deployed to assist FEMA in hurricane recovery, but given that she was not a paid employee, her opinion should not be viewed as completely subjective. In her evaluation of the organization and its efforts on the Gulf Coast, she wrote:

“It's not that the people that make up the FEMA machine are cold and uncaring. On the contrary, I have met some really incredible people. They really are doing the best that they can with limited resources. It's the system that is broken and unfortunately, I fear that the machine will in-turn break the spirit of our people” (Donley, 2005).

The rest of this article carries a positive tone as well, encouraging people to help out those in need. Titled “Clara's Story: FEMA can't replace the music,” the piece does not overly glorify FEMA's efforts, yet does hint that there was a lot expected of them after the hurricane and that the bureaucracy of the system was a major factor that hindered their ability to help.

As previously stated, of the articles written with a mention of USACE, only one of them was an actual news article syndicated from the *New York Times*, one was a blog, and the other five were forum responses from *Times-Picayune* readers. This is a significant finding and shows that the local newspaper was more focused on criticizing FEMA in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. As with the articles about FEMA, all but one mentioning USACE were negative. Given the number of forum postings, it can be assumed that the *Times-Picayune* readers were able to make up their own minds about USACE and its involvement with Hurricane Katrina rather than waiting to hear about criticism reported in the paper.

The one news article written about USACE was titled “Levee experts fault Army Corps budget cuts” and focused on the missed opportunity that the corps had to fix the levee problems in the Gulf Coast due to the fact that budget issues left them “stretched too thin.” The article

likened USACE to FEMA, quoting Raymond Seed, a civil engineering professor from University of California, Berkeley and a panelist of experts hired to investigate the failed levees:

“He compared the corps to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which has been widely criticized for losing expertise because of budget tightening after it was shifted into the Department of Homeland Security” (Schwartz, 2006).

In comparing USACE to FEMA with the phrase “losing expertise,” the quote indirectly tells the reader that the corps was not prepared in terms of number of employees to protect the people, an image damaging statement for USACE.

Another expert in the civil engineering field, program manager of Bay-Delta levees at the California Department of Water Resources David Mraz, was quoted as saying that “the corps had lost some of the competence that made it possible to spot problems in the complex and murky world of soil analysis” (Schwartz, 2006). According to the elaboration likelihood model of communication, the opinions of the readers of this article were probably swayed due to the high credibility of the experts that were quoted. Although the article was not necessarily intended as a persuasion piece, which is the groundwork for this particular model, the model “accounts for attitude changes induced by exposure to the opinions of varying numbers of other people” and that people also “scrutinize carefully every message that they receive” (Petty, Cacioppo, 1986).

There was a wide range of opinions presented in the forum discussions regarding USACE. The postings ranged from the most negative opinion that claimed that the corps “killed 1000 people—plain and simple” to a one-line posting saying that the corps will repair roof tops free of cost (Slidellwoman, 2006). These postings came directly from the public and prove that it is not necessarily the media's fault or responsibility to influence opinions; the public has the

ability to form their own thoughts even in the absence of news coverage on a given topic.

The articles on FEMA contained either direct criticism or negative comparisons between FEMA and other similar events, and these negative associations could have had an impact on the readership of the publication. The criticism was centered on how FEMA handled the task of sheltering the victims of the storm, a daunting task that required much planning and organization.

***USA Today Coverage:***

As previously stated, the coverage of FEMA in *USA Today* began on the day of the hurricane in the form of an updated news story. “FEMA Ready” is the sub-headline of the part of the story that mentions the organization and the initial coverage was relatively positive:

“Stung by criticism of its response to four hurricanes that clobbered Florida last year,

FEMA officials have promised to do better this year” (Cooper, P., Swanson, B., 2005).

This mention of the organization can be seen as “breaking even;” negative criticism is mentioned from the past, but the promise of better performances in the future can be seen as affecting their image positively.

The negative FEMA coverage is overwhelming. Some statements that were made in these articles that negatively affected the organization's image include: “acted 'without common sense” (McCoy, 2006), “FEMA was overwhelmed and under prepared for Katrina” (“Memo,” 2005), “reluctant to act” (Verrengia, 2005) and even a sports comparison was made saying that “quarterback Daunte Culpepper has been sacked more times lately than ex-FEMA director Michael Brown”(Halley, 2005). The prevalence of these types of messages out-number the neutral, and far out-number the few-and-far between positive messages in this national

publication's coverage.

Although minimal, positive messages were published in *USA Today* surrounding FEMA's involvement in Katrina. One article titled “Hotels open doors, but not to tourists” discussed one of the major early controversies with the organization's Katrina relief. The organization had to arrange for victims of the flooding to find shelter in hotels nationwide. This meant that hotels needed to cancel reservations from tourists and agree to devote large blocks of rooms to displaced hurricane victims. Hotel owner Don Zimmer was quoted as saying that his hotel was “committed to FEMA” (Woodyard, 2005). Endorsement of this type helped add to the organization's credibility in a time when its credibility was being tarnished from all sides.

In a similar fashion, USACE coverage in *USA Today* was negative and criticism focused on whether or not the corps had used federal funding properly in hiring outside organizations to aid in relief efforts and also on whether or not the corps had properly maintained the levee system in the Gulf Coast prior to the hurricane in 2005.

Unlike FEMA, however, there are more human-interest pieces that simply mention USACE without offering a negative or positive descriptor, which could have worked to the organization's advantage. The benefit that the corps received of having neutral stories about them run in a period of controversy is one that should not be understated. Instead of having all negative content, their coverage in the few months following Katrina was able to stay close to breaking even. The negative comments that did arise during this time period called into question USACE's decision-making tactics, which would have affected their credibility to the readers.

## **Recommendations**

There have been a number of articles written on the proper way to handle a crisis situation such as Hurricane Katrina, and the steps for organizations to take in communicating with the public are specifically outlined. As mentioned previously, one of the main tactics that should be employed is to claim ownership of the situation at hand instead of trying to deny any involvement. Payne mentioned the benefit of not “stonewalling or obfuscating information,” and this tactic is echoed in Caywood's text on crisis communication preparation, but other options are presented in William Benoit's “general theory of image restoration,” a theory that has been cited in numerous articles on image restoration.

Benoit's theory focuses on five different communication options that an organization can choose to follow in order to attempt to restore their public image during and after a crisis occurs. His theory is different from other image restoration theories in that his is based on rhetorical criticism, which attempts to look at entire apologetic speeches rather than just one part of the speech, and it is also based on case studies of organizations and public figures that have attempted to restore their public image in the past. In examining Benoit's theory, Kimberly D. Eslbach explains that his “use of rhetorical criticism paradigms and case study evidence focuses attention on the content and processes of image management rather than on the form of image management, as social psychologists do” (Eslbach, 1997).

The five options include denial, evasion of responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. Denial comes in two forms: not taking any responsibility and shifting the blame to another party. “A firm may deny that an act occurred, that the firm performed the act, or that the act was harmful to anyone ... The second form of denial is shifting the blame, arguing that another person or organization is responsible for the offensive act”



(Benoit, 1997, p. 179). Examples of successful uses of denial are given, such as when Coke denied Pepsi's accusation that they require other accounts to pay higher prices or when Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred and the organization blamed the state and Coast Guard for a delayed reaction.

Evasion of responsibility, according to Benoit, can come in four different forms: provocation, defeasibility, accident and good intentions. Provocation is the claim that an offensive act was in response to another's offensive act, thereby putting the blame of the other party. Defeasibility implies that there was a "lack of information" about a particular situation, and therefore the organization acted without prior knowledge that the act might be offensive. Claiming that an act was committed by accident is a strategy employed in order to earn sympathy from the public, which should also lower the negative impact that the "accident" has on the organization's public image. Finally, by stressing that the organization had "good intentions" in mind when planning or executing an offensive act, the organization has the ability to stay in the public's good graces (Benoit, 1997, p. 180).

The third general strategy is to reduce the offensiveness of the act in question. This can be achieved in six ways: by bolstering the good parts of the act, minimizing the seriousness of the offense, differentiating the offense from other worse offenses, transcending or "placing the act in a more favorable context," attacking the accuser to reduce their credibility, or by compensating the victims of the offense (Benoit, 1997, p. 180-181). In the context of Hurricane Katrina and USACE and FEMA, strategies such as bolstering and compensating were attempted to try to reduce their responsibility in the crisis. FEMA tried to emphasize the amount of work they had put in to this crisis situation in comparison to past hurricanes (Cooper, P., Swanson, B.,

2005), and both organizations had to compensate the victims of the hurricane due to the large amount of property loss in the area.

In an attempt to inform the public of their positive participation in hurricane relief efforts and thus minimize the criticism of the delayed reaction, both organizations released a number of press releases during and after the hurricane. FEMA, in particular, released 33 press releases from the day that the hurricane hit, August 29, 2005 through the end of August alone ("FEMA News"). USACE also released positive press releases highlighting their relief efforts in the disaster, and also mention their involvement with FEMA's plan. The terminology that USACE used in mentioning FEMA, however, hints at evasion of responsibility: "The Joint Task Force continues to support FEMA's mission..." (Minsker, 2005). They do not claim ownership of the "mission," a strategy that tries to disassociate USACE from blame in the disaster. Although the organizations provide an archive of the press releases that were issued, there is no record of which media outlets received these press releases and therefore, it would be difficult to be certain of whether or not the *Times-Picayune* and *USA Today* were exposed to them.

The fourth message strategy that Benoit recommends in a crisis situation is to take corrective action after a crisis has occurred. "This action can take the form of restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive act, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act" (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). FEMA and USACE, whether they directly announced that they were going to take corrective action in the aftermath of Katrina, nonetheless took preventative action as soon as they could after the incident. Although this action did not prevent criticism, the amount of criticism would have been exponentially greater if this action was not taken quickly.

“The final general strategy for image restoration is to confess and beg for forgiveness,” otherwise labeled as mortification (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). This is the part of Benoit's theory that coincides with Payne and Caywood — admitting fault is the option that allows the organization to directly address the problem and it promotes transparency to the public, an aspect of communication that is especially helpful in a crisis.

One particular tactic that USACE used to deal with the controversies that arose regarding the contract to remove hurricane debris was to decline to comment. This particular tactic is not conducive to transparency and maintaining a positive image because it gives the public reason to doubt the organization. According to the experts, this strategy only furthers public curiosity into why the organization is not answering particular questions, which then leads to more investigation on behalf of the media. This is a cycle that is likely to repeat until the organization comes forward and takes responsibility for the situation.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the content analysis and case study of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency helped to answer each of the previously proposed research questions. The following summarizes the overall findings in terms of each individual question.

- (1) What examples of crisis communication were used during Hurricane Katrina by USACE and FEMA?

Each organization attempted to employ press releases to communicate their actions during the crisis to the press and public. On the organizations' Web sites, there is an archive of each press release distributed for the past few years, however there is no actual record of which

organizations received these press releases. The organizations also attempted to reduce the offensiveness of their responsibility in the disaster by compensating victims for property damages and the like.

- (2) How were these agencies represented in the national media as a result of their crisis communication efforts during Hurricane Katrina?

The crisis communication efforts of both agencies during the hurricane were not a factor in the coverage that each received in the local and national press. The content analysis shows that the coverage each received was mostly negative, indicating that these media outlets either did not receive press releases or simply chose to ignore them.

- (3) How could these efforts have been improved upon?

It would have been beneficial for each organization to follow Benoit's "general theory of image restoration" which recommends that preparation for crises occurs in advance and follows these five basic options: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. It would have also been beneficial to avoid the use of "no comment" when confronted by the press because this type of answer hints that the speaker is hiding something. Transparency is advocated not only by Benoit, but also by Payne and Caywood as well.

- (4) What types of crisis communication are available to public agencies, specifically proactive solutions versus reactive solutions?

Given that there is legislation in place that prohibits "government spending on publicity or propaganda purposes designed to support or defeat legislation pending before the Congress" and that publicity efforts have been limited to statements released to the press and only concerning non-controversial issues, public agencies have to walk a thin line when it comes to public

relations (DeSanto, 2000). Although there are a number of proactive strategies that are available to normal organizations, because of their limited public relations budgets, public agencies are often pigeon-holed into reactionary strategies such as crisis management that do not allow for creativity in order to solve the problem.

The case study of how the public image of USACE and the FEMA were affected by Hurricane Katrina shows that it takes time to earn the confidence of the public, but that confidence can be lost in a matter of minutes. Regardless of the communicative tactics undertaken by both public agencies to inform the media and general public of their involvement in hurricane relief, widespread media criticism was able to convince the public to negatively associate these organizations with the disaster.

According to Benoit, with corroboration from Payne and Caywood, in order to properly respond to a crisis, organizations first need to have a crisis plan in place which details the predetermined steps that the organization will take to help preserve their public image. They then need to decide on a message strategy that will communicate to the public how, if at all, the organization is involved in a situation and the future action that will be executed in order to fix the issue at hand. Although public governmental firms have to operate under stricter public relations rules and regulations than do firms in the private sector, they are permitted to use the media as an outlet for positive information, and by formulating a relationship with local and national media outlets, the likelihood of gaining positive media coverage is considerably higher than if there is irregular or inconsistent media outreach.

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